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October 29, 1962

TO: The Secretary

THROUGH: S/S

FROM: J. W. Rostow

SUBJECT: The Intelligence Community and the Cuban Crisis

The thought occurs to me that among other lessons of the Cuban crisis should be a feeling of assurance regarding the dependability and usefulness of our intelligence collection and appraisal process.

It is evident that insofar as the three absolutely basic questions in the crisis were concerned, our intelligence estimates had the situation cold, and hence gave us a secure base from which to operate:

— The community for some months had through its collection and analysis processes spotted and drawn accurate conclusions from evidence of Soviet strategic military inferiority.

— The community was unanimous, insofar as I was able to see, in an estimate that the Soviet Union would not resort to, nor accept serious risk of, general war in the crisis.

— The community reached the consequential conclusion that it would not be necessary for the US to consider concessions, other than possible atmospheric, to secure the liquidation of the bases without war.

As an old intelligence officer I was also immensely impressed by the performance in regard to pictorial evidence of what was going on in Cuba, including especially the speed of interpretation and the clarity and effectiveness of the presentation of the evidence so that it would be understandable and convincing to the non-expert.

As the crisis unfolded the community argued that the US would need not only to be initially firm, but to move with increasing speed and roughness, up to the point of an early direct take-out of the bases, if we were to be sure that we came out of the crisis with the

minimal gains and minimal losses that our strategic superiority would justify. Here they were patently as concerned with what might happen on our side (erosion) as on the Soviets' (false hopes they might still salvage their bases through maneuvers).

The suddenness and completeness of the Soviet collapse might seem to some to mean that stress on this point was unduly alarmist, reflecting a "demonist" fixation. Against the background of Soviet past conduct, however, as well as the sheer riskiness of the Soviet decision to establish the bases in Cuba in the first place, I do not see how the intelligence people could have justifiably refrained from such warnings.

Moreover, when all the elements of the drama are finally brought out, we may find that it was indeed the roughness and toughness we demonstrated on Friday and Saturday, which the Soviets probably read as portending an early drastic move against the bases or against Cuba itself, which brought the quick capitulation.

CC: Mr. Hilsman - IWR
Mr. Ball - U
Mr. Bruback - S/S
Mr. Johnson - G

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